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Retention and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in initial teacher education: a review of the literature

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Abstract

While the need to increase numbers of Indigenous teachers has been highlighted for many years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are still significantly underrepresented in Australia making up less than 1% of teachers in schools. Nationally, little has changed since the 1980s when Hughes and Wilmot (1992) called for '1000 Indigenous teachers by 1990'. This paper reports on an initial literature review of teacher education as related to the preparation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Alongside the scholarly literature, the review to date includes analysis of over twenty policy documents and government reports as well as web-based descriptions of historical and current models of Indigenous teacher education including both mainstream Education programs and cohort-based and community models. While the literature provides examples of successful models of Indigenous teacher education it also illuminates the longstanding and interrelated factors that continue to impact on the success or failure of teacher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are significantly underrepresented in Australia, making up less than 1% of teachers in schools. Although the need to increase the numbers of Indigenous teachers has been highlighted for many years, nationally, little has changed since the 1980s when Hughes and Willmot (1982) called for 1000 Indigenous teachers by 1990.

Issues in Indigenous higher education: setting the scene

This section of the literature review summarises identified issues and reports on perceptions of key stakeholders on issues related to the participation of Indigenous higher degree students in general, while the remainder of the report focuses on teacher education more specifically focusing on the issues for Education that might inform a nationally directed and collaborative approach.

According to the extensive corpus of literature on this point, Aboriginal Australians are significantly and chronically underrepresented in both student and staff numbers in Australian universities (DiGregorio, Farrington & Page, 2000; Nakata, 2004; Trudgett, 2011). Furthermore, there is poor recognition given to Indigenous Studies and a lack of visibility of Indigenous culture and knowledge on university campuses (Herbert, 2010).

Concerns over participation, retention and support of Indigenous Australians within tertiary institutions in general are well documented. However, recently Michelle Trudgett (2009) claimed that the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students participating in higher education programs has progressively broadened; therefore, it is essential to find out what is impeding Indigenous Australians from pursuing and completing degrees at Australian universities. Numerous barriers are regularly identified in the scholarly literature on this point, including financial hardship and the lack of institutional support (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011).

Underrepresentation in postgraduate study is strongly related to social class. Associated with the Widening Participation agenda, issues include finances and debt, being the first person in the family to enter higher education, and the perception that postgraduate study is inaccessible and entry into universities exclusive, alienating and remote. Any discussion of Indigenous participation in tertiary study in general must take into account Indigenous disadvantage and the broader issues of social class. These barriers to Indigenous participation in higher degree research may be related to the historical effects of colonisation and social disadvantage as much as they are they are related to cultural difference.

Higher education is widely understood to be important to Indigenous Australians to prepare educated people for leadership roles (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2006; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011), future workforce needs (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2010), and to change university culture in general to build capacity, to become more inclusive and to provide equitable access to opportunity.

1. Recruitment, application and entry process

For many Indigenous Australians, universities represent Western knowledge that is governed by dominant Western knowledge paradigms (Nolan, Frawley, & White, 2009). As such, Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous pedagogy, and Indigenous forms of governance and leadership have historically found no acknowledged place within the Australian university system. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, university attendance is therefore a cross-cultural experience (DiGregorio, Farrington, & Page, 2000). Thus, taking steps to participate in this unaccommodating system is potentially very daunting (Day & Davison, 2005), especially if there are few members of the Indigenous student's family or community who have themselves pursued tertiary education and who can provide support or act as role models (White, 2009). For instance, Trudgett observed that many potential Indigenous higher degree candidates have little knowledge of scholarship opportunities (Trudgett, 2009), suggesting that with more and better targeted publicity, the barriers apparent to Indigenous candidates at the point of application and entry into teacher education programs may be lessened. Beyond the need for targeted recruitment activity and information-giving, there are other strategies to attract Indigenous people into universities and into teaching. For instance, giving prospective students the opportunity to listen to high-achieving Indigenous teachers as role models is seen as a key strategy for recruitment (Drysdale, Faulkner, & Chesters, 2006). Several government reports emphasise the need to expand partnerships between secondary schools, higher education institutions and Indigenous communities to develop strategies to attract, retain and successfully graduate Indigenous students (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2010; MCEETYA, 2006). In a few significant cases, universities are entering into memorandums of agreement with Indigenous communities to boost Aboriginal education links.

2. Matters of support: academic, social, financial and personal

Some of the main concerns for Indigenous students in higher education are to do with the challenges they face in their everyday lives, and how these are managed and negotiated in light of university policy and procedures, and institutional expectations. The ability of faculty members to engage with Indigenous students and understand the specific challenges they face is vital to providing meaningful support for Indigenous students.

The discussion of support beyond the mere recruitment of Indigenous students is critical to the conversation. As Tinto (2008) reports, access without effective support is not opportunity. Types of support highlighted in the literature as particularly significant include

financial support (Bourke, Burden, & Moore, 1996; Shah & Widin, 2010), academic support (Laycock, Walker, Harrison, & Brands, 2009), social and cultural support (Craven, 2005) and overall institutional support.

The previous section in this paper made brief reference to issues of cultural isolation and exclusion. Indigenous university students often state they feel marginalised (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2010). It is sometimes the case that they do not know any other Indigenous university students and no one in their Indigenous community or family has experience with tertiary study. According to some literature (DiGregoria, Farrington & Page, 2000; Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2010), this isolation can have a profoundly negative effect on the success of the student. As a response to these issues, scholars in this field have called on universities to ensure that their Indigenous students are guaranteed a place of 'cultural safety' (Bin-Sallik, 2000; Coopes, 2009) where overt and covert instances of racism are identified and rectified (Herbert, 2010). Naming cultural safety as an issue for Indigenous university students is increasingly overtaking the previous discourses of cultural responsiveness, sensitivity or cultural appropriateness.

Isolation can come from many places, within and outside the institution. Because opportunities have historically been lacking for Indigenous participation at universities, Indigenous students also express their conflicted feelings between the values and goals of their families and the values and goals of the institution (Craven, 2005). One place where this is visible is in university timelines: the university prioritises the goals of the institution (for example, completing a four year degree in a timely manner), but family and community may instead be prioritised by Indigenous students who may require more flexibility around course progression. The oft-expressed desire to make a difference in their community (DiGregorio, Farrington, & Page, 2000) may override the desire to complete their course 'on time', which is a main administrative concern of the university. Prioritising of family and community responsibilities may be misunderstood or dismissed. The need for flexibility in course progression for Indigenous students has been noted both in Australia and internationally (Holmes, 2006). In addition, some literature notes that sometimes Indigenous university students are mistakenly deemed to have 'failed' because they may appear to have left their studies or may have left the course before completion; however, they may later return to university study after a break or may have fulfilled their goals having found careers in their preferred fields.

In addition, the reasons for 'failure' seem to be regularly misunderstood. In 2001, the MCEETYA Task Force on Indigenous Education identified 'psychological state' as the most likely predictor of student withdrawal: "Feeling uncomfortable on campus, loneliness, homesickness, anxiety, depression, low motivation and marital and family conflicts were most frequently cited as contributing factors" (Office of Evaluation and Audit, 2006, p. 29). This is significant in light of Foley's (1996) suggestion that administrative and academic staff at universities tend to over-emphasise the need for academic and tutorial support at the expense of personal support.

Having said this, however, issues related to financial support are also apparent and may present significant barriers for Indigenous students. Although the availability of scholarships may assist Indigenous students, they are often not enough to address the fundamental issues of poverty and disadvantage that have a disproportionately large impact on the lives of Indigenous Australians (Banks, 2007). It should also be recognised that poverty is a layered issue. Poverty influences other issues such as health, housing and personal safety. Even baseline scholarships may not be enough to remedy this disadvantage and attract Indigenous students to full-time study. Nevertheless, there is good reason to offer financial incentives and support when possible.

Bunda, Zipin and Brennan (2011) argue strongly that an overemphasis on affirmative practices, such as student stipends and preferential access (for small numbers) to universities through 'special entry' programmes projects a *deficit* view of Indigenous cultures that is regularly lamented in the literature (Harrison, 2005; Whatman et.al, 2008). Writers such as Bunda et al. (2011) and Santoro et. al (2008) suggest that material disadvantage is less significant than epistemological Whiteness in influencing Indigenous participation at university.

3. Aboriginal knowledge systems and Indigenous perspectives in the White academy

Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars have discussed the dearth of Indigenous perspectives, Indigenous methodologies and Indigenous awareness within Australian universities. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) pointed out over a decade ago that many Indigenous students have struggled individually to engage with the disconnections that are apparent between two elements: the demands of their academic work, and the realities they encounter among their own and other Indigenous communities with whom they share lifelong relationships. Some of the reasons suggested for the limited participation of Indigenous university students are deeply related to differing epistemologies, Indigenous standpoints and Indigenous worldviews. Indigenous scholars such as Martin Nakata (2004) argue that Indigenous people must participate in higher degrees to influence knowledge in general. Thus, while acknowledging that higher degrees are not the only evidence of knowledge or expertise, the opportunity to obtain a higher degree is still significant to the pathways available to Indigenous Australians. The focus on teacher education as an issue is most directly related to leadership.

Like Nakata, many Indigenous academics believe that the current barriers to full and inclusive participation in tertiary study in Australian universities can be overcome. This could be done by "decolonising the academy" and ensuring the full and equal incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems into the traditional Western structure, and the participation of Indigenous scholars at all levels and in all disciplines therein (Phillips, Phillips, Whatman, & McLaughlin, 2007; Prior, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Woods & Biermann, 2008). A growing body of international Indigenous literature exists on issues related to 'Indigenising the academy', 'de-colonising Indigenous tertiary education' (Arbon, 2008) or what Alfred in New Zealand (2004) calls 'warrior scholarship'. Universities are being called on to include Indigenous perspectives at all scholarly levels, something that requires motivation, awareness and training. Embedding Indigenous perspectives is an oft-stated focus within faculties of education in Australian universities, though mostly with respect to non-Indigenous teacher education (Craven, 2005; Malezer & Sims, 2002; Phillips, 2011).

A range of programs exists to support exclusively Indigenous teacher education. Some programs take place largely in communities (generally through distance learning) and in mixed-mode programs that allow students to do some of their course on campus and the rest away from campus. In other words, though there are general statements that can be made about Indigenous Teacher Education, different types of programs and different communities encounter different issues.

1) Cohort programs: a brief review of the literature

Both overseas and in Australia, models of 'cohort' programs have been developed to support Indigenous teachers. It is outside the scope of this literature review to detail each program

and program type. Instead, some examples are given here of these programs and the issues they encounter.

The Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) is provided by collaboration between James Cook University, Education Queensland and the Tropical North Queensland Institute of Technical and Further Education. In 2001, it boasted a retention rate of 82%, which York and Henderson (2003) claim is, in part, due to the support and security provided by distance education offered in a home community setting. RATEP provides a program that aims to reduce the alienation experienced by some Indigenous pre-service teachers in an urban campus. Bethel (2006) states that RATEP students benefit from staying on their own communities, no longer required to relocate or learn in a “cultural void” (p. 31). This is especially true for communities that can cater for the cultural and linguistic needs of second or even third language learners. She claims, however, that once there are enough Indigenous teachers in Australian schools, “segregated” Indigenous teacher education programs will no longer be necessary (p. 36).

Mason, Reid and Perry’s (2003) history of the University of Western Sydney’s Aboriginal Rural Education Program (AREP) identifies some of its suggesting that some of these have to do with never having been given a chance to prosper. The institutional insecurity of cohort programs is mentioned in other literature as well, including reminders that these important programs should not make those involved in mainstream teacher education forget their responsibilities to Indigenous students—Indigenous education should be ‘core business’ as well (MCEETYA, 2006). However, Mason et al.’s report is significant in highlighting a unique component of cohort programs: their ability to both Indigenise and ‘politicise’ the curriculum and to ensure that Aboriginal voices are heard and Indigenous politics openly discussed (see also Cassidy, 2004).

Cohort programs struggle for the university’s recognition. Although they may be successful in community terms, they are often perceived by the university as a less credible “offshoot” (Cleverley & Mooney, 2010, p. 111) and are, thus, dependent on unstable funding and support. Programs such as RATEP, in general, have impressive graduate rates (Price, 2011). While Indigenous responses to the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011) found that Indigenous students are engaged with learning at a similar or slightly higher level than their non-Indigenous peers, block release programs had between 16% and 20% higher course completion rates than those who were studying in full-time ‘mainstream’ programs on campus (Price, 2011). Programs such as these overcome some significant barriers for students who would otherwise have little or no chance of becoming qualified teachers.

2) Block-mode, mixed mode, blended, flexible, remote and/or online learning

Block mode tuition is a form of mixed-mode tuition that couples residential on-campus intensives with lengthier off-campus periods (Willems, 2012). Although distance learning is often advocated some literature exists both to support and critique programs in which much of the learning is done off campus. In support, mixed-mode delivery is recognised as benefiting the most disadvantaged and/or remote Indigenous students, many of whom would not engage in tertiary study otherwise (Office of Evaluation and Audit, 2006). Programs are well used and have comparable, if not marginally better, course completion outcomes than mainstream programs have.

Many of these programs are heavily dependent on online learning with some concerns related to this. (Milton & Vozzo, 2010). These include both practical deterrents, such as internet speed and access from remote settings, as well as the lack of familiarity and experience of some, though by no means all, Indigenous students (Shah & Widin, 2010).

Most significantly, though, are suggestions that remote or online learning may be culturally alienating for some Indigenous students for whom relationship and deep connection are central (Willems, 2012).

The Office of Evaluation and Audit (2006) identifies some other issues related to away-from-base teacher education that are important predictors of students failing or withdrawing, including students with insufficient basic literacy and numeracy to undertake and complete courses, and the competing demands on students to manage family, community, work and study. The report recommends that universities focus on attainment of educational outcomes rather than enrolment numbers.

3) General and mainstream issues

The literature on Indigenous participation in mainstream teacher education includes similar discussions of the need for both greater enrolments and improved support for better graduation outcomes. It appears that, at least for school leavers, low enrolments may not primarily be a matter of lack of information (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010). Other research, however, suggests that, in general, Indigenous students still set their career aspirations at lower levels than their non-Indigenous peers do (Craven in Price, 2011, p. 22). Support for academic literacy is discussed regularly in the literature, with the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council arguing for careful attention to be paid to appropriately preparing students to complete their studies.

Although the literature refers to the significance of Indigenous learning styles (Hughes et.al, 2004), Nakata (2001) sees discussions about the implementation of culturally specific strategies as problematic, having the potential to obscure institutional deficits by suggesting the problem is within the students themselves, or with their culture. Cassidy (2004) states his belief that while institutional systems must change, and Indigenous priorities should be understood, this is different from thinking Indigenous students are cognitively different. ‘Differences’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learning styles have more to do with priorities. For instance, the centrality of relationship to Indigenous people is highlighted by Trotman and Kerr (2010), who claim that their Indigenous pre-service teachers are especially responsive to assessment such as personal reflection and the writing of personal history. Herbert (2005) also argues for the use of personal stories to provide a space for Indigenous voices.

Much of the literature reminds us that the best teacher education programs will foster relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people (Harrison, 2007; Bunda et. al, 2011). Teacher education ideally promotes dialogue or conversations in which “both educators work together, respecting and valuing each other’s culture” (Bevan & Shillinglaw, 2010, p. 14). The urgent significance of ‘relationship’, or what Butcher et al. (2011) call ‘transformational partnerships’ is most present in the literature published by Indigenous authors, many of whom report on the need to listen to Aboriginal teachers, elders and community. The literature also argues strongly for an increase in Indigenous faculty. Bunda et al. (2011, p.13) argue that within faculties of education, Indigenous academics have significant “re-educative” effects on “whitestream” (rather than “mainstream”) institutions. Shah and Widen’s (2010) more recent Indigenous Student Satisfaction Survey notes the significance of faculty leadership to drive a long-term, sustainable strategy, recommending that senior Indigenous people with membership to key university committees are important for the process of improving Indigenous participation and success.

The significance of Indigenous support units is worth a special mention because they are regularly cited in the literature as having provided crucial safe and supportive places for Indigenous students (Ford, 2010; Whatman et al., 2008).

Conclusion

This paper reports on an initial literature review of the preparation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. Alongside the scholarly literature, the review includes analysis of over 20 policy documents and government reports, as well as web-based descriptions of historical and current models of Indigenous teacher education, including mainstream education programs and cohort-based and community models. Although the literature provides examples of successful models of Indigenous teacher education, it also illuminates the longstanding and interrelated factors that continue to impact on the level of success of teacher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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